3-1997

Public Housing in Singapore: Interpreting 'Quality' in the 1990s

Siew Eng Teo
National University of Singapore

Lily Kong
Singapore Management University, lilykong@smu.edu.sg

Published in Urban Studies, Volume 34, Issue 3, March 1997, Pages 441-452.
http://doi.org/10.1080/0042098976069

Public Housing in Singapore: Interpreting 'Quality' in the 1990s

Teo Siew Eng and Lily Kong

Summary. While writings exist on various aspects of public housing in Singapore, recent developments in the 1990s have not yet been given any serious academic attention. Our intention in this paper is to focus on such developments, paying particular attention to the government's policy of providing quality housing. After setting the context of efforts at providing quality in the first three decades of public housing by the Housing and Development Board, we turn our attention specifically to the 1990s, focusing on three areas in which attempts are being made to improve quality, namely, the physical upgrading of older estates, the privatisation of HUDC flats, and the invention of new schemes such as the executive condominium concept. In the final section, we argue that, as in earlier decades, such efforts belie a hegemonic intent, essentially to manage Singaporeans' growing aspirations and thus to gain political legitimacy for the government. This we term the 'politics of quality' in public housing. We then discuss briefly some reactions to such attempts at hegemony.

Introduction

By comparison with many other large cities in the world, modern public housing in Singapore has achieved impressive results. From old, badly degenerated, overcrowded slums, characterised by, *inter alia*, poor sanitation and lack of hygiene, high-rise public flats of varied designs and sizes now characterise the skyline. Whereas tuberculosis was rife and buildings posed fire hazards, Singaporeans today enjoy high standards of public hygiene and safety as well as numerous luxuries in high-quality housing symbolic of modernity.

These changes in the housing landscape have taken place over a short period of time. Up to the 1950s and early 1960s, Singapore was still plagued by the varied problems outlined above. Kaye (1960, p. 5), for example, documented the living conditions of a typical street in Chinatown in 1954, describing it as "among the most primitive in the urban areas of the world". Goh (1956) similarly found in a study conducted in 1953–54, that 73 per cent of surveyed households lived in badly overcrowded conditions. In another estimate, it was suggested that in 1960 one quarter of a million people lived in badly degenerated slums in the city centre and another one-third of a million lived in squatter areas on the city fringe (Teh, 1975, p. 5). This is significant, considering that in 1960, the total population was only 1.6m (Department of Statistics, 1983).

Given the severe shortage of decent housing in that period, the Housing and Develop-

Teo Siew Eng and Lily Kong are in the Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, 10 Kent Ridge Crescent, Singapore 119260. Fax: 65–7773091. E-mail: geokongl@nus.sg.

The authors wish to acknowledge Viviana Low's help in the Lorong Lew Lian questionnaire survey.

ment Board (HDB) was established in 1960, replacing its predecessor, the Singapore Improvement Trust,[1] tasked with the job of housing Singaporeans. The HDB's top priority was to build as many housing units as possible within a short time. By the end of its First Five-Year Plan in 1965, the HDB had exceeded its construction target of 50 000 units by 5000 and was able to house 23 per cent of the total population in public flats. However, while the targets pertaining to quantity had been satisfied, the flats were very basic in nature, and little attention was paid to quality. Indeed, many were one-room 'emergency' flats, each with a kitchen, a toilet-cum-bathroom, and a room which served simultaneously as bedroom and living room (HDB, 1961, p. 3). By its Second Five-Year Plan (1966–70), however, the HDB's success in meeting its quantitative targets meant that it could now pay a little more attention to quality, a direction that has persisted and indeed become most important today.

While writings exist on various aspects of public housing in Singapore (see, for example, Teh, 1975; Teo and Savage, 1985; Wong and Yeh, 1985; Teo, 1986; Tai, 1988; Pugh, 1989; Castells *et al.*, 1990; Ooi *et al.*, 1993; and Chua, 1995), recent developments in the 1990s which deserve documentation and analysis have not yet been given any serious attention. It is our intention in this paper to focus on the complexion of public housing in Singapore in the 1990s, paying particular attention to the government's policy of providing quality housing. In the next section, we will present the context by outlining in brief the varied ways in which attention has been paid to quality in the first three decades of public housing under the HDB in Singapore. We will then turn our attention specifically to the 1990s, focusing on three areas in which attempts are being made to improve quality. In the final section, we will argue that, as in earlier decades, such efforts belie a hegemonic intent, essentially to manage Singaporeans' growing aspirations and thus gain political legitimacy for the government. This we term the 'politics of quality' in public housing. We will then discuss briefly some reactions to such attempts at hegemony.

Improving Quality in Public Housing: The First Three Decades

In the late 1960s, when the HDB began to pay heed to the need to improve the quality of its flats, its strategy was to build bigger units, replacing the minimalist one-room 'emergency' flats of the early 1960s when the motivational force was purely to meet quantitative targets (see Teh, 1975). Attention in the latter part of the 1960s was also paid to the living environment *in toto*, beyond the focus on the housing units *per se*. For example, greater emphasis was placed on the provision of open spaces, landscaping, car park facilities and recreational facilities such as playgrounds and sports facilities.

In the 1970s, attention to quality took the shape of even bigger and better designed flats in more attractive locations, as well as good infrastructural support in the form of efficient transport, adequate retail and recreational facilities and other amenities (Teo, 1986). At the same time, architectural variations were introduced in the design of the flats, thus creating more attractive external designs. By the late 1970s, providing a housing environment of quality also meant encouraging an environment of neighbourliness and friendliness through the setting up of Residents' Committees, and the continued support given to community centre activities. Both were geared towards organising activities for residents, including social and recreational programmes (such as excursions and get-together parties) and educational ones (such as forums and exhibitions).

Between the late 1970s and 1980s, existing estates were also upgraded on an *ad hoc* basis as part of the effort to improve quality. Such upgrading took place along four lines. First, old flats were demolished so that land could be made available for redevelopment. Second, old one-room flats were converted into larger three- and four-room self-contained flats by knocking down the walls be-

tween the old flats. Third, part of the upgrading also entailed the provision of additional facilities for the older estates so as to ensure that they too had a share of better facilities such as those found in the newer estates. At the estate level, for example, Toa Payoh estate was provided with a commercial complex with fast-food restaurants and offices, a new bus interchange, the Mass Rapid Transit line stopping in the town centre, and the first government mini-hospital of 40 beds. At the level of individual buildings and units, new lifts were added; casement windows were installed to existing flats with open balconies; central television antennae were added; and rewiring and reroofing took place (HDB, 1979/80, pp. 6–7). Fourth, as part of the effort to improve old estates, rules on flat alterations were liberalised. Owners were allowed to make minor alterations themselves. For example, owners of five-room flats were allowed to install windows in their open balconies; residents on ground floors were permitted to extend their courtyard shelters to keep out the rain (*The Straits Times*, 3 March 1988, 6 January 1990); the space in recessed entrances and along common corridors could also be sold so that residents could turn them into mini-gardens or playgrounds and have improved security and privacy (*The Straits Times*, 25 February 1989).

Throughout the 1980s, to improve the quality of life in public housing estates, the HDB sought to promote new town character and community identity through the use of new building designs, in which different building heights were combined to break the monotony of the skyline. Greater use was also made of traditional features such as the pitched roofs, overhanging eaves and tall windows typical of a tropical building. In addition, the precinct concept, initiated in 1978, was further encouraged in the 1980s. Each precinct, consisting of 600–1000 dwelling units, and linked to other precincts by pedestrian paths, is meant to encourage meaningful social interaction among residents. The idea is to try to create a community activity focal point in the form of a landscape square with recreational facilities, kindergarten, eating places and local shops among a cluster of blocks. Precincts are also made more compact with closer spacing between buildings so as to enhance a sense of community spirit and neighbourliness.

'Quality' in the 1990s

While the HDB certainly directed resources and energy towards improving the quality of housing and the quality of life in new towns in the first three decades, at no point has this been more apparent than in the 1990s where specific emphasis is placed on quality and service. In this regard, a variety of measures have been taken, such as efforts to improve older existing estates through, for example, upgrading individual units and blocks of flats as well as entire estates; the introduction of new schemes, namely, executive condominiums and housing cooperatives, and new design flats; and the privatisation of Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDC)[2] estates. In what follows, we will outline details of each policy, leaving the analysis and interpretation of intention and response to the final section.

Improving Older Existing HDB Estates

Attempts to improve existing HDB estates in the 1990s take a variety of forms. There are the government's formal upgrading programme, individual town council efforts to improve common facilities, the Selective En Bloc Redevelopment Scheme and government efforts to redevelop selected town centres. We will elaborate on each in turn.

In July 1989, the government announced a formal, large-scale S$15bn programme to upgrade existing HDB estates with the aim to "bring about a complete change in the perception of public housing" (S. Dhanabalan, quoted in *The Straits Times*, 12 July 1989). The project was to last 15 years and would affect 95 per cent of HDB dwellers (*Business Times*, 12 July 1989). Other than the scale of the programme, this plan differed from previous upgrading schemes because it did not

require existing residents to relocate or purchase another dwelling elsewhere. In fact, upgrading was to proceed while owners were still living in the flats.

In formulating the HDB upgrading programme, the government hoped to retain the population, especially the younger segment, in the older estates. This was deemed a priority, given the government's concern about the social and economic consequences of an ageing population in established estates like Toa Payoh and Tiong Bahru (*The Straits Times*, 8 May 1989). For example, in 1970, Toa Payoh had 3405 births but by 1987, the number of births had dropped to only 148. In contrast, a newer outlying estate like Yishun New Town reported 3461 births in 1987, up from only 495 in 1980 (*The Straits Times*, 8 May 1989). It was feared that the smaller and older population in the older estates would depress consumption and force shops and other businesses to move out. Schools and other social amenities demanded by a younger population would also be underutilised. Upgrading the physical environment was thus a way to stem the flow of younger people to the newer new towns like Tampines and Pasir Ris with their better facilities (*The Straits Times*, 24 July 1989).

At the same time, there was another expected spin-off from the upgrading programme in that it provided a constant stream of work for the construction industry that would, also, require architects and other designers to acquire a new level of expertise (*The Straits Times*, 20 October 1989).

The upgrading programme incorporates three main components of development. The first involves the creation of precincts consisting of distinct groupings of five to seven blocks of flats. The idea is to allow each to have a distinctive appearance which will, in turn, help to create small communities with a sense of identity, ownership and belonging (*The Straits Times*, 12 July 1989). This represents an improvement from past attempts at precinct creation which lacked proper planning, and hence failed to achieve the desired goals of precinct development (Teo, 1986). Additionally, the upgrading includes the injection of amenities like multi-storey car parks, landscaped gardens and children's playgrounds.

Second, at the block level, architectural improvements are made to give each block its own individuality. Lift lobbies and entrances are enclosed to improve security while the designs of staircases and corridors are also upgraded (*The Straits Times*, 12 July 1989).

The third aspect of upgrading concerns the flat itself. For example, flats with only one bathroom/toilet have an extra toilet or bathroom installed in them. The kitchen area may also be expanded in the upgrading process (*The Straits Times*, 12 July 1989; *Business Times*, 12 July 1989).

By March 1993, it was decided that residents would be offered a choice of any one of three packages: basic, standard or standard-plus. In all three packages, improvements to toilets are made and aluminium windows provided. The difference between the basic and standard packages lies in the improvements to the block. The basic package only focuses on essentials like upgrading of existing toilets but does not include, for example, upgrading of building façades or replacement of block numbers. The standard-plus package gets an additional space-adding item like an extra toilet (*The Straits Times*, 11 March 1993; *Business Times*, 11 March 1993).

In general, the upgrading process aims at being as flexible as possible, by allowing residents and town councils to participate in the decision-making process. Management of the project is undertaken by the respective town councils which, though guided by a set of general principles, make their respective decisions on the specific types and extent of the upgrading work to be done (*Business Times*, 20 October 1989). In any housing estate targeted for upgrading, residents of the individual precincts have the final say with regard to whether the upgrading works are to proceed or not. Only when at least 75 per cent of residents in a precinct agree to upgrade will the improvements be implemented (*Business Times*, 17 December 1989).

An important consideration in deciding whether to upgrade is the cost of the project to HDB dwellers. From the onset, the government had indicated that the project was to be a joint venture between the Ministry for National Development and flat-owners (*Business Times*, 20 October 1989). Initially, owners of three- and four-room flats were to pay about 25 per cent of the total upgrading costs, rising to 35 per cent for those in the five-room and executive flats. Town councils were to bear 5 per cent of the total upgrading costs (*Business Times*, 17 December 1989) while the government's share was between 65 and 75 per cent (*The Straits Times*, 16 December 1989). Soon after, the government announced that it would absorb a greater percentage of the costs, including paying the full costs of the ancillary works, such as replacing lift cages and constructing ramps for the handicapped (*The Straits Times*, 11 March 1993). Effectively, flat-dwellers have to pay only 10–20 per cent of the upgrading costs. The ratios were revised in the light of feedback from residents and Members of Parliament. However, better-off residents who choose the standard-plus package have to pay 40–80 per cent of the costs, partly because of the high cost of the space-adding item (*The Straits Times*, 11 March 1993).

To help residents with payment, the Ministry of National Development (MND, the Ministry under which the HDB functions as a statutory board) put together a package of financial incentives. They include the use of the residents' Central Provident Fund (CPF)[3] savings, which normally cannot be used for renovation purposes, to repay the renovation loans provided by the HDB. The loan is extended at 0.1 per cent above the CPF interest rate and repayment can be made over 10 years. Owners who have financial difficulties are allowed to defer repayment, with interest, until they sell their flat or transfer the lease to another owner. This option is designed to remove any financial obstacle that may prevent the less well-off owners from upgrading (*The Straits Times*, 16 December 1989).

The upgrading programme can broadly be categorised into three phases of implementation: a pilot phase, a demonstration phase and a main phase, each planned systematically to win residents' support for the upgrading programme. The pilot phase was essentially to test out new materials and methods so that upgrading could be carried out with minimal disruptions to residents. For this purpose, 4 vacant blocks totalling 480 units in Teban Gardens and Woodlands were used. In order to simulate actual living conditions that residents would have to undergo during the upgrading process, several families of employees of the HDB were recruited to live in the flats (*The Straits Times*, 16 December 1989, 27 March 1991).

Following the pilot phase, 6 precincts (Marine Parade, Kim Keat, Lorong Lew Lian, Telok Blangah, Ang Mo Kio and Clementi) were picked for the demonstration phase, involving a total of 6000 units (*The Straits Times*, 4 February 1993). The estates were selected on the basis of their locations, being spread out in different parts of the island and because they belonged to the older estates built in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The intention of the demonstration units was to help HDB residents to visualise the overall effect of upgrading and to assist them in the decision of whether or not to go along with the upgrading scheme (*The Straits Times*, 16 December 1989).

To increase the range of ideas on possible upgrading design options, the government farmed out three of the demonstration precincts to private architects. The opportunity for private-sector participation was enthusiastically received by the Singapore Institute of Architects, evident in the variety of designs submitted to the HDB.

The main phase of the programme was implemented in 1993 with the first batch of precincts (Bukit Merah, Bukit Ho Swee, Queenstown, Kallang Airport, Boon Lay and Balestier/St Michael's Estate) identified for upgrading (*The Straits Times*, 24 April 1993, 24 May 1993). Since then, a number of other precincts have been earmarked. In the main phase, the private sector also participated in

the upgrading programme. Bukit Merah and St Michael's Estate are examples of estates that were upgraded based on designs produced by private architects (*The Straits Times*, 24 May 1993).

In addition to the formal upgrading programme, the HDB embarked on an interim 'mini' upgrading programme of housing estates between 10 and 15 years old (*The Straits Times*, 12 February 1993). The interim programme was deemed necessary as it was estimated that the main upgrading programme could take up to 20 years to reach some estates. Interim upgrading is confined to improving only the common areas of the HDB estates while the main programme would concentrate on the interiors of the flats (*The Straits Times*, 14 February 1993). The interim upgrading scheme is thus designed to complement the main upgrading programme.

The formal upgrading programme, though extensive in reach, is not the sole programme in place to improve existing HDB estates in the 1990s. By 1991, town councils of such estates as Ang Mo Kio had also announced plans to upgrade facilities and to improve the physical environment in their HDB estates (*The Straits Times*, 17 May 1991). Unlike the more piecemeal nature of earlier plans, the new plans gave estates a more upmarket and user-friendly high-quality environment as a whole. These plans, while complementing the government's initiatives, also reflected the growing confidence of town councils in managing their estates (*The Straits Times*, 17 May 1991).

In 1995, plans were also announced for the selective redevelopment of old blocks of flats. This is known as the Selective En Bloc Redevelopment Scheme (Sers), which will be applicable in some more mature estates in the central area rather than in the outlying new towns. The decision to redevelop selectively lies with the Ministry of National Development and is not subject to voting in the same way that upgrading is. At the same time, unlike the upgrading scheme which involves improving existing blocks, in Sers, some blocks will be completely redeveloped. Residents would be compensated for their old flats and guaranteed a new one at a 20 per cent discount in mature estates. As an example of Sers, it was announced that 16 blocks of low-rise flats in Boon Tiong Road in Tiong Bahru will be redeveloped. Although there are many other similar old SIT flats in the vicinity, these were chosen because of the availability of empty plots of land nearby on which the HDB can build first. Residents can then move to these new blocks before their old flats are demolished and new ones built in place. In this way, the physical living environment can be improved without having to move residents out of the area. The sense of community and rootedness to place can thus still be retained.

Apart from Sers, it has also been proposed that town centres of entire estates be redeveloped. These plans will also proceed without being put to the vote. The decision to upgrade will lie solely with the authorities, after views are heard from residents and grassroots leaders. The first plan to be unveiled in this respect was a comprehensive strategy to rejuvenate Toa Payoh town centre.[4] The plan, to be realised within five years from 1995, includes the construction of a new S$700m commercial complex with office and retail space and another office block in the town centre. It is also intended that pedestrian malls in Toa Payoh Central will be improved; new road linkages will be introduced to improve access to Toa Payoh; and new housing will be constructed on vacant state land and land cleared when rental blocks are freed of tenants. Two blocks of rental flats with elderly residents will also be refurbished with new non-slip tiles, pedestal toilets, hand-rails and alarm systems. At the same time, three community centres in the town will be upgraded (*The Straits Times*, 2 September 1995). After Toa Payoh, two new towns built in the 1970s, Bedok and Ang Mo Kio, will also be redeveloped.

Privatising HUDC Estates

As indicated earlier, the HUDC was set up in

1974 to cater for the middle-income group. This was a group that enjoyed a total household income exceeding the ceiling that would qualify them for HDB flats,[5] yet found themselves priced out of the private housing market. In order to cater to their needs, HUDC-constructed flats followed the condominium concept, with maisonettes and flats in an estate within which communal amenities such as children's playgrounds and outdoor ball courts are provided. At the time of inception, the response was overwhelming, largely because they were "exclusive developments away from those sprawling HDB look-alikes, and priced at a considerable discount compared with private property" (*The Straits Times*, 2 September 1995). The HUDC merged with the HDB in 1982 while construction of HUDC estates stopped in 1985 after 19 estates or 7750 units were completed. This was due to a number of reasons: the closing gap between sale prices of HUDC flats and private property; improvements in HDB flats; and the raising of HDB's income eligibility ceiling.

In 1986, several HUDC estates were allowed to manage their own estates: Amberville, Braddell View, Chancery Court, Farrer Court, Laguna Park and Lakeview, although residents did not own the strata titles—that is, they did not own the common areas.[6] The rest of the 13 estates came under the purview of the HDB. In 1995, it was decided that residents in two HUDC estates, Gillman Heights and Pine Grove, would be given the option to privatise if at least 75 per cent of owners in each estate voted for it. Privatisation would allow leases of flats to be converted to strata titles and owners would own and manage the estates, including the common property areas (*The Straits Times*, 25 May 1995). When voting took place, both estates exceeded the necessary 75 per cent of votes. After privatisation, residents may decide how they wish to improve their estates. Subsequently, it was announced that four more estates would be privatised in the next stage, namely, Farrer Park, Lakeview, Hougang South and Jurong East, and this would be followed up by yet others.

Inventing New Schemes

Another major development of the 1990s that pays attention to improving Singaporeans' quality of life through their housing environment is the introduction in 1995 of executive condominiums, meant to house a 'sandwich class' between HDB and private housing (*The Straits Times*, 30 August 1995). The schemes will approximate private condominiums in that there will be facilities such as a swimming pool or tennis court. The first 540 units will be in Jurong East and Pasir Ris. First-time buyers will be given a S$40 000 grant but must find their own financing, whereas applicants for HDB flats will have HDB financing. Eighty per cent of the units will be offered to those in the queue for HDB executive flats (the upper range of HDB flats) while the rest will be open to others. Several restrictions must however be observed. An executive condominium owner can never buy HDB flats directly from the HDB. The flats must be occupied for five years before they can be sold to Singaporeans and permanent residents. Only after the tenth year will they be fully privatised; the ownership restriction will then be lifted. This is to prevent speculators from buying executive condominiums for investment.

In addition to executive condominiums, the HDB has also introduced another two new schemes: Design and Build flats (introduced in 1991), and Design Plus flats (introduced in 1995). These have better designs and finishes, such as coordinated tiles and sanitary fixtures, and have design inputs from private architects. There will also be attempts to incorporate nature in landscaping designs.

The 'Politics of Quality': Managing Aspirations

As Castells *et al.* (1990, p. 319) argue, the success of public housing in Singapore was important in establishing the government's political legitimacy and dominance. This was possible in the early years of Singapore's independence because public housing provision was held as testimony to the newly

elected government's commitment to bettering the material conditions of Singaporeans (Chua, 1995, p. 131).[7] In later years, the tangible blocks of flats became powerful symbols of success, monuments that attest to the HDB's achievements, a claim that is effectively made by the government (Pugh, 1989, p. 837; Chua, 1995, p. 139).

In attempting to provide and/or to facilitate quality housing in the 1990s, it may be said that the government is attempting to maintain its political legitimacy. The provisions and schemes of the HDB in previous decades no longer suffice. As Singapore develops and standards of living improve, Singaporeans of the 1990s have developed increasingly higher aspirations. This is most clearly reflected in the desire to own private properties and cars, two extremely limited commodities in the context of land-scarce Singapore. In order to manage Singaporeans' aspirations to own private property, the government has therefore introduced the executive condominium scheme (*The Straits Times*, 31 August 1995) and has privatised HUDC estates. New schemes have also been introduced in which HDB flats are increasingly provided with the amenities, designs and fittings of private condominiums. For those who may find it frustrating to remain in their older housing estates while other Singaporeans proceed to realise their aspirations, the upgrading programme was introduced to help to fulfil their expectations. Apart from improving the conditions in which they lived, upgrading would also raise the value of their HDB flats.

How successful are these measures likely to be? Initial response to the proposal to build executive condominiums has been lukewarm. Many Singaporeans expressed the view that they would be paying two to two-and-a-half times more for executive condominiums than for HDB executive flats even though the latter are one-sixth to nearly one-half bigger. Yet, it must be noted that these executive condominiums are 15–20 per cent cheaper than comparable private apartments in similar locations (*The Straits Times*, 30 August 1995). For those who expressed interest in the scheme, the prestige of living in private property and the additional recreational amenities are definite draws (*The Straits Times*, 31 August 1995). Market analysts suggest that in the long term, executive condominiums will "support private housing prices by providing a cheaper entry-point into the market" (*The Straits Times*, 30 August 1995). The privatisation of HUDC estates appears to have been more unequivocally welcomed, as more than the requisite proportion of residents in Gillman Heights and Pine Grove have agreed to privatise while residents in some other HUDC estates have requested that their estates also be privatised in the near future.

Upgrading has also received positive response from those affected. The results of a questionnaire survey conducted in late 1994 involving 100 randomly selected households in Lorong Lew Lian, one of a batch of six housing estates identified for the demonstration phase upgrading in 1992, bears this out.

Lorong Lew Lian consists of 8 blocks of flats with 906 households. It was beginning to show signs of dilapidation after more than 15 years of existence and existing facilities had become inadequate to meet the needs of an increasing proportion of the elderly population. In the attempt to provide the estate with a new and distinct identity, the upgrading focused on three levels: precinct, block and individual units. The aim was to create an environment that would be both aesthetic and functional. At the precinct level, the design features included pavilions, a bird viewing area, open plaza, galleries, pergolas, barbecue pits, landscaped gardens, residents' corner and covered walkways. At the block level, the emphasis was on features such as a new façade, sheltered entrance porch, improved lifts, integrated ceiling and lift fittings and finishes. The upgrading of the individual units took the form of additional balcony space and new aluminium window fittings, floor tiles for bathrooms, doors and water closet appliances.

These improvements at the various levels to enhance the estate underlie the overall

objectives of the HDB's upgrading programme: the idea is to create through the precinct a living environment that is conducive to forging an interactive and cohesive community while block and flat upgrading are directed towards improving the housing condition of residents. The ultimate aim is to provide the estate with facilities and a living environment that are comparable with those found in the newer housing estates (HDB, 1991/92).

A great majority of those surveyed expressed satisfaction with the overall improvements in the quality of their living environment. About 90 per cent of the household heads interviewed said they were pleased with the block façade design as well as the fixtures and finishes to their flats, especially the additional balcony space. Almost 80 per cent expressed the view that the provision of precinct facilities like the children's playground, barbecue pits and residents' corners had brought residents closer together. It is more difficult to assess the extent to which the new identity resulting from the upgrading programme will be able to halt the outflow of the younger population from the estate. Lorong Lew Lian is one of a number of older estates to have suffered a massive outward drift of its better-educated and more affluent younger population as they upgraded to bigger and better-designed flats in the newer new towns. At the time of the survey, about four-fifths of Lorong Lew Lian's household heads were over 40 years old, while in the new towns, the heads are predominantly in the 25–35 age-group. Respondents' responses to the question whether they were contemplating a move to the new towns now that the estate had been upgraded indicated that of the 15 respondents in the 20–39 age category, only one was considering moving out because of growing family size and improved financial position. The remaining 85 per cent of the heads in the 40-years and above age-group were absolutely certain of wanting to stay on.

The findings of the Lorong Lew Lian study suggest that the residents are highly satisfied with their upgraded estate. This may in part be due to the fact that the residents were the most supportive of the upgrading programme among the six estates identified for renewal, with 98 per cent of the households voting in favour of the project (*Houseword*, April 1992). Besides achieving its objective of providing a better environment and improved housing, the upgrading programme has managed to retain the younger segment of the population in the estate. It remains to be seen whether in the forthcoming general elections, Lorong Lew Lian residents' satisfaction with their improved living conditions will be translated into a resounding victory for the government.

While improving the quality of housing has been made a hegemonic tool to gain political legitimacy, it has also been wielded directly as an object of political patronage. This is not unique to the 1990s. In 1985, Mr Teh Cheang Wan, then Minister for National Development, expressed the view that those who supported opposition parties would be discriminated against in the delivery of some public estate maintenance services. As he pointed out,

> This is a very practical political decision.... It's fair from our party point of view that we should give priority to the constituencies with PAP {the ruling People's Action Party} MPs and give lower priority to opposition MPs.... But they will not be denied the service. (*The Straits Times*, 22 March 1985)

When introducing the Town Council Act, residents were also reminded that "it would be in {their} interest...to be very careful whom they choose to be their representative in Parliament" (Ministry of National Development, 1988, p. 15) because their chosen representative would also run their town councils, overseeing estate management and improvements. A constituency with a less able candidate would presumably not be able to run the estate as well as a highly qualified (PAP) candidate.

This appropriation of public housing and its management for political purposes is evident in the context of the formal upgrading

programme. In 1992, for example, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong made public the government's intention to link the choice of housing estates to be upgraded to the strength of votes for the PAP in the general elections (*The Straits Times*, 11 April 1992). In 1996, Community Development Minister Abdullah Tarmugi further outlined the three criteria that the government would use in deciding which HDB blocks would be upgraded: surpluses, a good spread and support. Specifically, upgrading could be carried out only if the government continued to enjoy budget surpluses. The HDB would also try to ensure a good geographical spread of the precincts being upgraded. Finally, by way of garnering support, he suggested that

> …if you want your blocks and precincts to be upgraded earlier, you know what to do at the next election. The answer is in your hands. (*The Straits Times*, 29 January 1996)

In the face of criticisms, and by way of assurance, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong asserted subsequently that all HDB residents would benefit from upgrading. Objective criteria such as the age of flats, their location and the level of resident interest (as indicated by votes in favour of upgrading) had been and would continue to be used, and only when two constituencies had HDB flats of similar ages would the level of support for the PAP government be used as a 'tie-breaker' (*The Straits Times*, 5 February 1996).

Conclusion

Singapore's public housing efforts have moved from attempts to deal with the massive problems of overcrowding and unhygienic conditions in the 1960s to a commitment to provide quality housing. In the present context, 'quality in the public housing sector' is measured by both physical and social yardsticks. In the case of the former, the aim is to ensure that housing conditions achieve features of modernity, with high accessibility to shared facilities and amenities. The ability to provide spacious quarters within the constraints of land-scarce Singapore in the form of high-rise estates also constitutes a measure of 'quality'. The intention is also to create aesthetic and distinctive environments, contributing to a living environment characterised by material comfort and convenience. In addition, 'quality' is also measured by the ability to develop cohesive neighbourhoods in which social bonds are strong.

In all of these, the HDB has largely been successful, nowhere more apparent than when the HDB won the Asia Management Award in Development Management in 1995. Conferred by the Asian Institute of Management, the award recognises the excellent achievements of Asian management. In the award citation, the HDB is said to have "creat{ed} substantial positive impact on target beneficiaries through innovative, sustainable and effective management" and to have improved the quality of life of people (*The Straits Times*, 17 October 1995).

Although the HDB has achieved much, Singaporeans' aspirations are also growing, and so demand for high-quality housing has increased. In other words, this emphasis on quality is necessary because Singaporeans, increasingly accustomed to good, basic provisions, are hankering for better and more. For some segments of the population, this has translated into a demand for private housing. For others, it has meant ever bigger and/or better-designed HDB flats. These aspirations must be managed, particularly because in the context of Singapore, ownership of property, particularly private property, does not only stand for a desire for more material comfort, it represents as well a status symbol. Given such a scenario, the authorities, while having achieved much, are faced with the continuing challenge of having to manage Singaporeans' aspirations.

We have shown in the preceding sections what efforts have been made to provide 'quality' housing through the public agency, the HDB, in the 1990s. At the upper end of the scale, attempts are being made to convert HDB-managed HUDC housing into private

property, and effort has been put into introducing HDB housing that will eventually become private properties (executive condominiums). These schemes however come at a cost that may not be easily affordable by all. For the majority of Singaporeans, therefore, quality housing will take the shape of improved designs for new flats and upgraded old flats.

Given growing aspirations, the political implications of such policies are likely to become accentuated henceforth. The potential political gains are great, if these schemes succeed in fulfilling aspirations. The government is fully aware of this, and has turned the situation around so that if Singaporeans want to increase the likelihood of their aspirations being fulfilled, they must first give political support. This is nowhere more apparent than in the upgrading programme. As indicated in 1992, the government intends to use the programme as the centrepiece of its electoral platform for the next two general elections (due in 1996 and 2001) (*The Straits Times*, 13 April 1992). The government intends to make voters more responsible by having them bear the consequences of their decisions at the ballot box (*The Straits Times*, 20 April 1992). This will become significant for the four opposition wards—Bukit Gombak, Hougang, Nee Soon Central and Potong Pasir—which will exceed 20 years after the 1996 elections. How they vote may then have a bearing on whether they are upgraded subsequently.

The politicisation of HDB upgrading has not been without its critics. Concern has been raised that the PAP should not use taxpayers' money to further its own political cause (*The Straits Times*, 5 February 1996). Furthermore, to tie votes to a single issue—the housing programme—is not necessarily effective since they are more likely to be cast based on a variety of issues. There is also the potential that such politicisation would be ultimately harmful to the nation, breeding a 'What can you give me if I vote for you?' electorate. The government thus has a tightrope to walk. On the one hand, it will have to manage, if not help to fulfil, the higher aspirations and, indeed, expectations of Singaporeans, bearing the political costs if they fail. On the other hand, if it chooses to dangle policies designed to improve people's living conditions as carrots, and suggests that these policies will be put into action only if they are given political support, it could backfire. Despite having achieved much in the arena of housing provision in the last three decades, the provision of a quality housing environment in the 1990s and beyond will nevertheless continue to pose a major challenge.

Notes

1. The Singapore Improvement Trust was set up in 1927 to supervise urban improvement and development. It was only in the 1930s that it ventured into public housing in recognition of the shortage of housing for lower-income groups. While the SIT attempted to address the housing problem, its achievements were small in comparison with the magnitude of the problem.
2. In 1974, the Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDC) was created as a subsidiary of the HDB to build flats that would cater for the middle-income group. Its specific role will be discussed in more detail in a later part of the paper.
3. The CPF is a compulsory national social security savings scheme kept in trust by the government. All employers and employees are obliged to contribute to it.
4. Toa Payoh was the first satellite new town built by the HDB in the 1960s.
5. The HDB has set a limit on the total household income that would qualify a household for ownership of a HDB flat. The ceiling has been revised upwards through the years to reflect rising salaries and higher costs of living.
6. Owners, however, do own their car park lots.
7. Singapore gained internal self-government in 1959. In 1963, it gained full independence from Britain as part of Malaya. The two entities separated in 1965 to form two independent states, Malaysia and Singapore.

References

CASTELLS, M., GOH, L. and KWOK, R.Y.-W. (1990) *The Shek Kip Mei Syndrome: Economic Development and Public Housing in Hong Kong and Singapore*. London: Pion.

CHUA, B.H. (1995) *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*. London and New York: Routledge.

DEPARTMENT OF STATISTICS (1983) *Economic and Social Statistics Singapore 1960–1982*. Singapore.

GOH, K.S. (1956) *Urban Incomes and Housing: A Report on the Social Survey of Singapore, 1953–54*. Singapore: Department of Social Welfare.

HDB (various years) *Annual Reports*. Singapore: Housing and Development Board.

HILL, M. and LIAN, K.F. (1995) *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore*. London and New York: Routledge.

KAYE, B. (1960) *Upper Nankin Street Singapore: A Sociological Study of Chinese Households Living in a Densely Populated Area*. Singapore: University of Malaya Press.

MINISTRY OF NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (1988) *Town Councils: Participating in Progress*. Singapore.

OOI, G.L., SIDDIQUE, S. and SOH, K.C. (1993) *The Management of Ethnic Relations in Public Housing Estates*. Singapore: Times Academic Press/The Institute of Policy Studies.

PUGH, C. (1989) The political economy of public housing, in: K.S. SANDHU and P. WHEATLEY (Eds) *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, pp. 833–859. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

SALAFF, J.W. (1988) *State and Family in Singapore: Restructuring an Industrial Society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

TAI, C.L. (1988) *Housing Policy and High-rise Living: A Study of Singapore's Public Housing*. Singapore: Chopmen.

TEH, C.W. (1975) Public housing in Singapore: an overview, in: S.H.K. Yeh (Ed.) *Public Housing in Singapore*, pp. 1–21. Singapore: Singapore University Press.

TEO, S.E. (1986) New towns planning and development in Singapore, *Third World Planning Review*, 8, pp. 252–271.

TEO, S.E. and SAVAGE, V.R. (1985) Singapore landscape: a historical overview of housing change, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 6, pp. 48–63.

WONG, A.K. and YEH, S. (1985) *Housing a Nation: 25 Years of Public Housing in Singapore*. Singapore: Maruzen Asia.